

The 2011 Hunting Season Outlook and Beyond: Hoping for Some Moderation

*By Randy Kreil
Chief Wildlife Division*

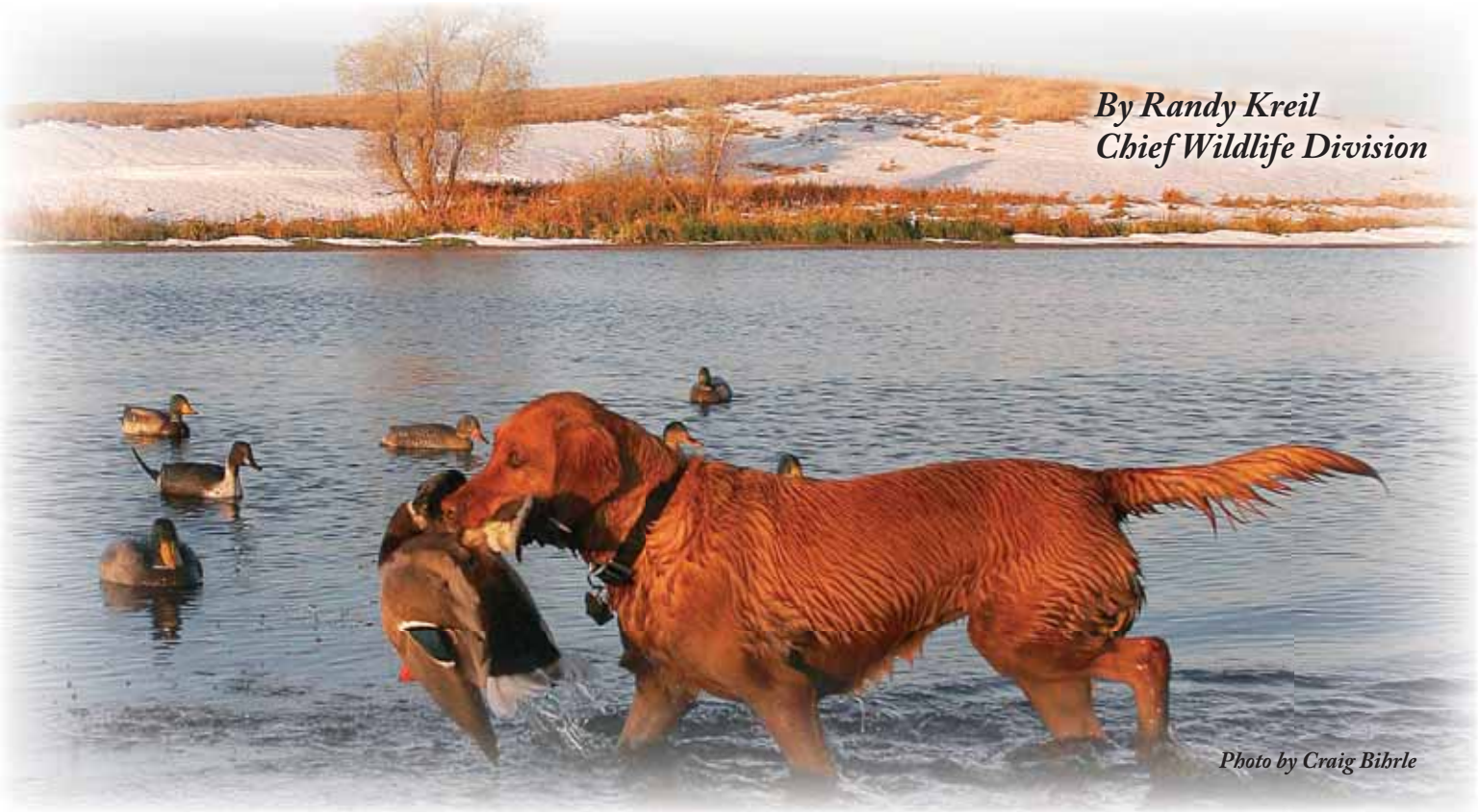


Photo by Craig Bibrle

It's no secret to those of us who have hunted in North Dakota the past two decades that we have ridden a high tide of opportunities. In fact, this run of "good old days" has existed long enough that many people consider what we have experienced as normal.

Even during the best times, wildlife populations can go up or down from year to year. However, this fall, for the third year in a row, the outlook is a little bit less optimistic than the year before, and it looks like the start of a trend that may not right itself for some time.

The hunting opportunities that attracted record numbers of resident and nonresident hunters are primarily a result of two factors. One, a run of generally mild winters from about 1998 to 2007 allowed some wildlife species to survive winter, and reproduce in spring, at levels well above normal.

And two, habitat conditions not seen for a generation, created by federal farm programs and policies coupled with balanced stewardship of the land by agricultural producers.

We have seen habitat changes coming for some time, and have tried to prepare hunters for what will happen. Significant changes in federal farm policy

have made enrolling land into conservation programs less profitable than growing commodities. Even more tragic is the increasing conversion of native prairie and other grasslands to cropland at a rate not seen since the early 1970s, when the phrase "plant from fence row to fence row" got its infamous start.

At the same time the state was losing hundreds of thousands of acres of grassland habitat, three brutal winters in a row have hastened the impending downward slide of some wildlife populations and associated hunting opportunities.

The first indication of trouble was observed in species with limited range in North Dakota. Game and Fish first closed the sage grouse season in 2009, and closed the prairie chicken season in 2010.

Even more troubling and disappointing to many North Dakotans is closure of pronghorn season again this year. Only four years ago the state had a record population of these speedsters of the prairie, which meant that some units even had second doe licenses available.

A similar trend is also evident for some of our more common species. In 2007 Game and Fish made nearly 150,000 licenses available and now, with three

The 2011 Hunting Season *(continued)*

miserable winters and the loss of a million acres of Conservation Reserve Program grassland, we are down to less than 110,000.

Fortunately, we still have enough deer hunting opportunities for everyone who want to hunt during the gun season. According to our licensing staff, a record 99,000 people applied in the first lottery this year. Not everyone will get the license they want in the unit they want, but the deer hunting tradition will carry on.

Our pheasant, partridge and sharp-tailed grouse populations also took a hit from the winters, but more importantly their ability to bounce back from winter losses is diminished by the loss of a million acres of CRP and conversion of other grasslands.

Pheasant harvest peaked in 2007 at over 900,000 birds, and fell to less than 600,000 roosters last year.

Winter mortality, questionable weather during the nesting and brood rearing period, statewide flooding problems, and the additional conversion of even more CRP and other grassland acres will likely combine to produce fewer birds this year as well.

This fall will still have plenty of opportunities for North Dakota hunters, and compared to, say, the mid-1980s, things are still pretty good.

However, we could use a little moderation in weather patterns – like more mild winters, fewer spring monsoons, and no droughts. We also need moderation at the federal level, to retain policies and programs that at least give agricultural producers a reasonable and economically viable choice to include conservation in their farming practices.

Such moderation might not get us back to the highest tide from a few years back, but would certainly provide some good news overall.



Photo by Greg Gullickson